

The Ones Who Jumped

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "J Blackmer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and a long, sweeping tail.

Ball State University

Muncie, IN

April 2012

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2012

Undergrad
Thesis
LD
2489
.Z4
2012
.B374

Abstract

After the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, Americans were faced with terrifying realities of loss, overwhelming sadness, and sometimes, the ultimate sacrifice. These realities are still relevant today, starting with Sept. 11th as the catalyst, but continuing to expand throughout the years. I wanted to explore these realities by writing a full length play, having a staged reading of the play, and performing as the lead role. By combining the knowledge I have attained from four years in a bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Musical Theatre, as well as my passion for writing, I have created a play which challenges audiences to reevaluate their own lives, relationships, and choices.

Before I even knew that Ball State University existed, I was facing a dilemma much bigger than “Where should I attend college?” I was wondering for what I should attend! All of my life, I had been interested in two things: writing, and performing. I was torn. It was almost as hard as (I imagine) trying to pick a favorite child would be. I knew I wanted to sing, dance, act, *and* write, but very few colleges offer programs that teach all of these things completely, and in only four years. To be honest, you’re lucky if you get a program that teaches acting, singing, and dancing intensively for four years. And so, when I was accepted into Ball State University’s Bachelor of Fine Arts musical theatre program, I rejoiced. I figured I could minor in creative writing, while majoring in musical theatre, and all of my problems would be solved! I was sadly mistaken.

After my first two years of intensive theatre courses, and only one single creative writing class (that I had to fight with my theatre advisor to let me take!), it became apparent that I would not be able to minor in writing like I had wanted. I was heartbroken. I spent nights upon nights staying up till three in the morning, writing short stories, poetry, and novels. If I couldn’t write in school, by George, I would write on my own time! And so, when I realized I had the chance to complete a creative project for my Honors Thesis, I knew exactly what I would do. I would do something that would combine all of my creative loves with everything that I had

learned within the past four years: I would write a play, and then perform as the lead role in a staged reading of said play. I knew that this would be the perfect project to fulfill a graduation requirement. What I didn't know was that this process would become the most artistically fulfilling experience of my entire college career, and arguably, my life thus far.

Writing and then performing in my own original work is the most conclusive form of artistic and academic expression I could possibly complete. I have literally combined knowledge from every class I have ever taken in order to complete this project. I had four main goals:

One; I wanted to write a full-length play. Before this, I had never written a play in my life. I had only told stories through prose, well constructed and meticulously detailed. When you write a novel, you have the luxury of explaining to an audience what your characters are thinking and feeling at all times. You are able to describe exactly what they look like, what they smell like, what they love and hate. You can even describe how hard they grasp a stranger's hand when they shake. But in a play, you are limited to telling your story through two things: dialogue and action. The actors are in charge of squeezing each other's hands when they shake, and unless one character physically winces, or remarks, "Ouch! You squeezed too hard!" the audience will have no idea what corresponds between two meeting strangers. This was incredibly terrifying. As a writer, I found it increasingly difficult to give away so much power to the imaginary future actors who I would most likely never meet.

And yet, with this fear came freedom. I have always been told, “Show, don’t tell.” This became a sort of mantra that I would repeat again and again to myself when I found myself being too much of a novelist: Show, Carolyn. Don’t tell. Through writing this play, I have learned how valuable action can be. You can say so much by saying nothing at all. By trusting the aforementioned imaginary future actors, and having a character give a knowing glance to another character, so much more can be said than if I were to write a three minute monologue describing the character’s deepest darkest desires and fears.


Two; I wanted to be able to perform in the reading of the play. It has been a dream of mine to write a novel, which is then popular enough to get made into a movie, and then star in the movie as a character I wrote. The only difference with this, though, is that the play would not be able to be fully produced. A reading of a play is very different from a full on production. For a reading, the characters stand with the script in front of them, and read their lines in character to an audience. This is difficult because it is hard to interact with your scene partner while also keeping your eyes on the page. However, I soon found that reading this play out loud was much easier than I thought it would be! I had spent so many hours slaving over correcting the dialogue that I guess I subconsciously memorized it! By the night of the reading, I found that I was able to completely interact with my scene partners, instead of keeping my eyes locked in the script. This was one of the most convenient and enjoyable discoveries I made during this experience.

Three; For once in my life, I wanted to be in control of an artistic experience. I know that sounds incredibly selfish, so please let me explain. An actor's life can be summed up in one question: "Do they like me?" So much of what we do- our careers, our lives, our financial situations- is based off of that one, annoying, powerless question: "Do they like me?" Every audition is a job interview, and usually ends in rejection. Every audition is a chance to make someone in charge of your fate want to work with you. And sometimes, no matter how much you practice, no matter how well you did, no matter if you belted a high F sharp and held it for ten minutes while doing a quadruple pirouette in three-inch heels, all supported with most honest acting choice in your entire career, it doesn't matter. You will still get the same answer you got from the last twenty-seven auditions: "No." "We're not interested." "We're actually looking at someone else for the role." "You're too short/fat/skinny/tall/sexy/innocent." And my personal favorite, "You're almost too perfect for this role. We don't want you to play yourself. Please, though, keep in contact and audition next year!" All of my life, I have not been in control of the outcome. I have never been the emotionless face behind the table. And after taking directing classes in college, I wanted to be that person! I didn't want to be the heartless emotionless face, but I did want to be the person who is making the artistic decisions. After all, these characters came from my head. I knew exactly how they were feeling at all times. I knew what they should sound like. I knew the back-stories of every character; plot details that were not included in the final script.

For the first time in my life, I was able to cast a play. I was SO fortunate; every person I asked to be a part of this was free and (even better!) they were *excited* to

work on this project with me. Perhaps the most important role to cast was the male lead, Vic. Vic's character is witty, silly, and sensitive, while also possessing a masculine and darker side. He needed to be able to be silly and goofy in one moment, and then suddenly become a serious "deep thinker," a man with a depressing past in the next. I had worked with Ben before in a play we were both cast in on campus, Charles Mee's "Big Love." Ben and I played opposite each other in the production, and we had the type of quick, witty chemistry needed to portray Vic and Hayden.

During the rewriting process, I was able to talk with the actors and ask them for their input. I soon realized that actors are *smart*. Give them good material to work with, and they will bring things to the table that you didn't even think of. Things that improve your script because of their own brilliance. It's so funny... My whole life I've hated playwrights who are too detailed. As an actor, reading an incredibly detailed script is like reading a novel. You find yourself wondering, "Is there any room for my creative input? No? Okay great." Writing this play has given me such an appreciation for *good* playwrights, playwrights who trust the actors they will never meet, playwrights who give enough information to tell the story and then let it go, because their job is finished. I read plays differently now, both as a playwright and as an actor. I'm always looking for clues to what the playwright wants. For example, so much can be said with strong punctuation choices. So much can be said... with strong punctuation choices! (See what I mean?) Writing this play has helped me become a better reader, writer, and most surprisingly, a better actor, which has proven to be the most unexpected reward of this whole process.



And finally, last but certainly not least, goal number four; I want to eventually get this play published. I am still working on rewriting the play, for it is only in its fourth draft, but once I feel like it is good enough I plan on taking the necessary next steps to publication.

I first got the idea for this play four years ago. I am a devoted follower of the website, PostSecret.com. If you are not familiar with the blog, it is a website where people write their deepest, darkest secrets on a postcard and anonymously send them to the blog's creator, Frank Warren. Every Sunday, Frank uploads ten to fifteen of that week's most interesting, funny, and heartbreaking secrets. Four years ago, I came across a secret that has haunted me ever since. And it is from this secret that I got the idea for my play. I don't want to repeat the secret here, for fear of giving away the biggest and most important plotline of my play; but let's just say that that secret has kept me awake for countless nights, wondering what could drive a person to behave in such a way. This question continued to haunt me as I tried to bring the secret bearer to life, giving that person a name, a face, and a story.

I have to admit: I was afraid to write this play. The plot deals with the tragic events of September 11th, and event that I experienced when I was only in sixth grade. And yet, I still consider it one of the most pivotal moments of my entire life. I can't watch footage of that day without being transported back to that time, sitting on Mr. Zervos' homeroom floor, watching wide eyed with terror as the planes crashed into the towers again and again on the news. I wanted to write a play that confronted these issues, not issues of national security and war, but issues that dealt

with the more personal outcomes of that horrible day. I wanted to explore themes of death, loss, and mourning. Even in my short twenty-two years of life, I have personally dealt with the deaths of close loved ones three times: the death of my sick grandfather, and deaths of young friends, taken by an accidental drug over dose and one unexplainable, barely forgivable suicide. And yet, through all of this pain, there was always hope. That is a lesson that I have learned the hard way, and wanted to include in my play. I wanted the audience to question their very existence, and those around them. I hoped that by writing characters that live during such an unpredictable time, audience members would be forced to put themselves in their positions: "What would I say to every member of my family if I knew they would be gone tomorrow? Would I live each day differently, knowing that my own life is coming to a close? Would I ever be able to forget the tragedy and move on? Would I be able to find new love?"

Ironically enough, even cruelly enough, as fate would have it, something would happen the day of the reading that would do nothing but reiterate the themes and ideas that this play presents. Ben (the actor who played opposite of me and read for the part of "Vic") found out that day that one of his close friends from high school had passed away in a tragic accident. Ben proved to be a little too much like his selfless character, Vic, because he didn't even tell me. He kept it to himself, saying, "I know how much this play means to you. That was your night, and I didn't want you worrying about me throughout the whole thing." Ben proved to be, truly, the best man for the job. He was completely selfless, dedicated, and engaged. His passion and

desire for this project to be a success mirrored mine. I could not have had such a successful reading experience with any other actor other than Ben.

As I have mentioned before, writing this play has proven to be the most artistically fulfilling experience of my entire college career. I have learned an immense amount about myself as an artist throughout this entire process. Now that I have done this, I consider myself to be a better writer, a better performer, and a better reader. I appreciate good playwrights even more, because now I realize just how difficult it is to write an engaging, honest story for the stage. I respect actors more, for their creative input, ideas, and instincts. I appreciate myself more, as both a writer and an actor, and have learned to give myself more credit for the good things that I am able to do. That being said, I have also become very acquainted with my shortcomings, realizing that while I may have a knack for writing dialogue, I need more work on my character development. But how wonderful it is to be able to can say I have written a full-length play! I am extremely proud of the work I have done, and I cannot wait to see where the next steps in this creative process will lead me. I know I have a lot more to learn, a lot more to write, and a lot more life to experience. But with a first step like this one, I now feel more artistically rejuvenated than ever, and I am eager to emerge wide eyed into the “real world” to see what I can accomplish.